

Blow hot and cold: Popular support for the no-concessions policy in terrorist hostage-takings

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**THIS IS A PREPRINT. IT HAS NOT (YET)
UNDERGONE SCIENTIFIC PEER-REVIEW (NOVEMBER 18, 2021).**

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This research was supported by a grant from the German Research Foundation (DFG) awarded to the last author (HU 1772/5-1).

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Abstract

Governmental responses to the frequently occurring terrorist hostage-takings, in which authorities must weigh the lives of the hostages against the lives of potential future victims, depend on popular support for governmental policy. Despite this, little is known about how people form their judgement of governmental policies in this moral dilemma. We argue that people typically have incomplete information and their policy support for concessions can be substantially altered by changing the information they receive about different consequences. Across three studies (overall $N = 1,547$) employing both qualitative and quantitative methods, we found that (a) people show lower support for concessions when they have incomplete information, (b) providing information on the benefits of concessions increases support for concessions, (c) support for concessions under full information increases when the benefits outweigh the costs and when a norm prescribes concessions. The potential implications for policymaking are discussed.

Keywords: terrorist hostage-takings, no-concessions policy, moral dilemma, information processing

Blow hot and cold: Popular support for the no-concessions policy in terrorist hostage-takings

Most Americans consider terrorism a major threat (Poushter & Fagan, 2020) and debates about acceptable ways to deal with this threat divide the nation (Gramlich, 2018; Tyson, 2017). There is a controversial debate about whether governments should concede to terrorist hostage-takers (Borger et al., 2014), who abduct thousands of people every year and threaten to kill them unless authorities meet their demands (Miller, 2020). Conceding to terrorists' demands increases the likelihood of a safe hostage release and reduces casualties in these immediate situations (Mertes et al., 2020, 2021), but increases the likelihood of more abductions in the future (Brandt et al., 2016). Thus, terrorist hostage-takings pose a moral dilemma in which governments must weigh the lives of the hostages against the lives of people who might be endangered in the future (e.g., Scheuer, 1990).

Beliefs on how to respond to this dilemma seem strong and persistent, especially in countries like the U.S., where the 9/11 attacks led to anti-terror legislation and military operations that continue to this day. Like many countries, the U.S. have a long-standing policy to deny terrorists' concessions (The White House, 2015; UN General Assembly Resolution 2133, 2014). Yet, even its most ardent proponents violate this *no-concessions policy* (hereafter NCP) from time to time (e.g., Callimachi, 2014a). Public opinion can exert pressure to do so (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2014). Democratic governments disregarding public opinion risk losing voter support (cf. McNair, 2017). If, however, policy enforcement in life-or-death situations depends on public support for said policies, then it is critical to understand what shapes people's support.

Despite the important potential implications for policymaking, psychological research has so far ignored the question of how people come to their judgements of governmental decisions regarding how to respond to terrorist hostage-takings. We address this gap in three

studies using a mixed-methods approach. Before we delineate our study designs and hypotheses, we describe the characteristics of terrorist hostage-takings from a moral dilemma perspective, highlighting its unique features in comparison to other moral dilemmas.

Responses to Terrorist Hostage-Takings as a Moral Dilemma

Terrorist hostage-takings differ from many other moral dilemmas in three important ways. We want to illustrate these differences with the prominent Trolley problem (Foot; 1967). In the most common description of this dilemma, a runaway trolley is on collision course with five people who are certain to die in the crash. The accident can be prevented by taking action to redirect the trolley to another track, where it would kill only one person. Would it be acceptable to take action?

Such artificial moral dilemmas have been criticized for a lack of experimental, psychological, and mundane realism (Bauman et al., 2014). Participants often consider them implausible because they are abstract thought experiments rather than situations that people could actually find themselves in. In contrast, marking the first difference, terrorist hostage-takings represent frequently occurring real-world dilemmas with great societal relevance (e.g., Callimachi, 2014a).

Second, in artificial moral dilemmas, people are typically fully informed about the outcomes that will occur if they take action. In the Trolley problem, taking action results in one rather than five deaths. In contrast, when people become aware of an ongoing hostage situation through media coverage, the dilemma is usually not laid out for them in all details. This may be due to a factual lack of knowledge. Only recently have scholarly efforts led to a more comprehensive understanding of the consequences of the decision to concede to terrorist hostage-takers (e.g., Brandt et al., 2016; Mertes et al., 2020, 2021). Thus, most people's understanding of hostage dilemmas is presumably incomplete. People therefore probably resort to other sources of information, such as stereotypes, values, and norms, to

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inform their decision whether to support the NCP, which may result in a biased representation of the objective situation and to related inter-individual differences. For example, it is a common misconception that terrorists are generally afflicted by mental illnesses and thus unable to act rationally (e.g., Silke, 1998, see also Noor et al., 2019). It is also possible that certain information exists, but is misrepresented to or even hidden from the public. For example, political figures have often defended the NCP saying that denying concessions deters future hostage-takings (e.g., “Obama on Payments to Iran: This Wasn't Some 'Nefarious Deal'”, 2016), although this notion has been called into question before (e.g., Jenkins, 2018).

Third, in most artificial moral dilemmas, the consequences of taking action are certain. In the Trolley problem, the deaths of the people bound to be hit by the trolley are unavoidable. Terrorist hostage-taking dilemmas, in contrast, have uncertain outcomes. While conceding increases the likelihood of a safe hostage release (Mertes et al., 2020, 2021), it is a common concern that terrorists might not keep their promises (e.g., Bapat, 2006). Likewise, there are cases in which authorities deny concessions and the terrorists still decide to let the hostages go (Mertes et al., 2020). Moreover, while concessions increase the likelihood of future attacks, these attacks may never happen and consistent denial of concessions does not eliminate terrorist hostage-takings completely (e.g., Brandt et al., 2016). These uncertainties may give rise to several psychological effects affecting individual perceptions and judgements of governmental policies, such as wishful thinking (e.g., Krizan & Windschitl, 2007), hindsight bias (e.g., Christensen-Szalanski & Fobian Willham, 1991), and other biased perceptions of uncertain events. Depending on which information is available to them, people might perceive the consequences of concessions to terrorist hostage-takers as more or less certain. This, in turn, might affect their NCP support.

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In summary, understanding what determines people's NCP support has great relevance and is unlikely to be derived from responses to other moral dilemmas. To address this important research gap, we used a mixed-methods approach. In our exploratory and qualitative Study 1, we surveyed U.S. participants to identify factors influencing their support for the NCP in a situation with incomplete information. In Study 2, we experimentally investigated how the availability of information on the benefits and costs of concessions affects people's NCP support. Finally, in Study 3, we drew from recent moral dilemma research (Gawronski et al., 2017; Gawronski & Beer, 2017) by presenting participants with a specific hostage-taking scenario. We manipulated the consequences of conceding, moral norms, and whether support for concessions to terrorist hostage-takers was the action (vs. inaction) default to investigate how these factors affect NCP support. Thus, our research contributes to a better theoretical understanding of how public support of governmental policies in hostage situations can change depending on the available information, allowing to predict policy support depending on what information is emphasized by policymakers.

Study 1

In this first exploratory and qualitative survey, we wanted to obtain an overview of whether Americans are aware of what their government's policy on concessions to terrorist hostage-takers is and in how far they support it. We further wanted to learn what motivates their NCP support.

Method

Sample

We collected data from $N = 301$ American Prolific users (43.85% female, 1.33% other; $M_{\text{age}} = 35.09$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.33$) who were potential voters. They received \$1 as remuneration. Participants indicated their political ideology on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *extremely liberal* to 7 = *extremely conservative* (see Table 1). A bootstrapped one-

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sample t -test against the midpoint of the scale (4) revealed that participants were on average rather liberal ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.69$), $t(300) = -8.55$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.49$, 95% CI = [-1.02; -0.63].

Procedure

After participants gave informed consent, we told them that we were interested in their opinion on terrorist hostage-takings. As we wanted to know what people think based on their presumably incomplete understanding of hostage dilemmas, we only outlined the basic premise of hostage-takings: “In hostage-takings, terrorists abduct people and threaten to kill them unless the authorities concede to their demands.” Participants then filled out a short questionnaire (Table 1). Study completion took on average five minutes.

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Table 1

Measures Used in All Three Studies in Order of Administration (Part 1)

Construct	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Support behavior intention			One item, "Would you sign the petition?" (yes / no)
NCP support	One item, "The government should never concede to terrorist demands." (1 = <i>fully disagree</i> , 7 = <i>completely agree</i>)	One item, "The government should never concede to terrorist demands." (1 = <i>fully disagree</i> , 7 = <i>completely agree</i>)	One item, "The government should never concede to terrorist demands." (1 = <i>fully disagree</i> , 7 = <i>completely agree</i>)
Policy knowledge	One item, "Please indicate what you think the government's policy on dealing with terrorist hostage-takers is: 'The government's policy is to never concede to terrorists.'" (1 = <i>fully disagree</i> , 7 = <i>fully agree</i>)		
Reasons for support	One item, "Please explain which information you factored into your decision when you rated in how far you agree with the statement: 'The government should never concede to terrorist demands.'" (free text)		
Appropriateness of concessions			One item, "How appropriate would it be for the government to pay the ransom in order to secure the release of the hostage?" (1 = <i>not at all appropriate</i> , 7 = <i>completely appropriate</i> ; Körner et al., 2019)
Consideration of norm		One item, "When I answered the question of how the government should act, I thought primarily about the fact that it is the norm not to concede to terrorists." (1 = <i>completely disagree</i> , 7 = <i>completely agree</i>)	One item, "When I answered the question of how the government should act, I thought primarily about what the majority of the people in my country think." (1 = <i>completely disagree</i> , 7 = <i>completely agree</i>),
Consideration of benefits		One item, "When I answered the question of how the government should act, I thought primarily about the benefits that concessions to terrorists could have." (1 = <i>completely disagree</i> , 7 = <i>completely agree</i>),	One item, "When I answered the question of how the government should act, I thought primarily that the terrorists will release the hostage when they receive what they demanded." (1 = <i>completely disagree</i> , 7 = <i>completely agree</i>),

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Table 1

Measures Used in All Three Studies in Order of Administration (Part 2)

Construct	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Consideration of costs		One item, "When I answered the question of how the government should act, I thought primarily about the damages that concessions to terrorists can cause." (1 = <i>completely disagree</i> , 7 = <i>completely agree</i>),	One item, "When I answered the question of how the government should act, I thought primarily about potential future consequences of the ransom payment." (1 = <i>completely disagree</i> , 7 = <i>completely agree</i>),
Perceived credibility		One item, "I found the general information on terrorist hostage-takings that I read in this study to be credible." (1 = <i>completely disagree</i> , 7 = <i>completely agree</i>)	
Perceived likelihood of hostage release		One item, "The terrorists will safely release the hostages after they receive what they demanded." (1 = highly unlikely, 7 = <i>highly likely</i>)	One item, "The terrorists will safely release the hostages after they receive what they demanded." (1 = highly unlikely, 7 = <i>highly likely</i>)
Perceived likelihood of future attacks		One item, "The terrorists will use the resources they gain from authority concessions to execute further attacks in the future." (1 = highly unlikely, 7 = <i>highly likely</i>)	One item, "The terrorists will use the resources they gain from authority concessions to execute further attacks in the future." (1 = highly unlikely, 7 = <i>highly likely</i>)
Scenario plausibility			1 item, "I found the scenario I read to be plausible." (1 = <i>completely disagree</i> , 7 = <i>completely agree</i>)
Scenario plausibility (no alternatives)			One item, "How plausible is it that there are no alternative actions to achieve the release of the hostage other than to pay the ransom in the scenario?" (1 = <i>not at all</i> , 7 = <i>completely</i> ; Körner et al., 2019)
Perceived credibility			One item, "I found the general information on terrorist hostage-takings that I read in this study to be credible." (1 = <i>completely disagree</i> , 7 = <i>completely agree</i>)

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Table 1

Measures Used in All Three Studies in Order of Administration (Part 3)

Construct	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Attention checks			Three items, “Based on information on the terrorists’ past activities, it was predicted that they would use the ransom money to ...” (execute more attacks in the future / support their communities), “The recent poll cited in the article found that the majority of people in your country believe that ...” (human life in danger should be saved whenever possible / terrorist demands should not be granted), “The petition described in the article urged the government ...” (to pay the ransom / not to pay the ransom)
Political ideology	One item, “When it comes to politics, how do you usually think of yourself?” (1 = <i>extremely liberal</i> ; 7 = <i>extremely conservative</i> Motta et al., 2018)	One item, “When it comes to politics, how do you usually think of yourself?” (1 = <i>extremely liberal</i> ; 7 = <i>extremely conservative</i> ; Motta et al., 2018)	One item, “When it comes to politics, how do you usually think of yourself?” (1 = <i>extremely liberal</i> ; 7 = <i>extremely conservative</i> ; Motta et al., 2018)
Age	One item, "Please enter your age (in years)." (free input)	One item, "Please enter your age (in years)." (free input)	One item, "Please enter your age (in years)." (free input)
Gender	One item, "Please choose your gender." (female / male / other)	One item, "Please choose your gender." (female / male / other)	One item, "Please choose your gender." (male / female / other)

Results and Discussion

Table 2 shows descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for all variables of this study. A bootstrapped one-sample *t*-test against the maximum of the scale (7)—indicating that the U.S. follow the NCP—revealed that participants had an imperfect understanding of their government’s policy regarding hostage-takings ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.49$), $t(300) = -18.51$, $p < .001$, $d = -1.07$, 95% CI = [-1.75; -1.41]. Overall NCP support was rather high ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.62$).

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations for All Variables in Study 1

Variable	<i>M (SD)</i>	Intercorrelations			
		1	2	3	4
1 NPC support	4.96 (1.62)	1			
2 Policy knowledge	5.41 (1.49)	.47***	1		
3 Political orientation	3.17 (1.69)	.22***	.06	1	
4 Age	35.09 (11.33)	.15**	.10	.11	1

Note. $N = 301$, *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$

Qualitative Analysis

The open answers to the question of why people support the NCP were segmented into separate statements and analyzed. Statements were coded using terms that best described their content (cf. Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Every distinct reason to support or oppose the NCP became a new category. We compared new statements with existing categories and created new categories when new information did not fit in with previously established categories. These steps were initially undertaken by a single coder and later checked by the first author.

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Conflicts were resolved through discussion. We also computed the frequencies with which the categories were mentioned.

This approach yielded ten different categories, each representing a different motivation to support or oppose the NCP (Table 3). Only two of these categories support the option to concede to terrorist hostage-takers unequivocally: *saving lives* and *empathy*. 29 participants made such pro-concessions statements (9.9%). Seven categories oppose the idea of making concessions: *deterrence*, *political appearance*, *distrust*, *orientation towards official policy*, *injustice*, *legitimacy*, and *principle*. 139 participants made such contra-concessions statements (47.3 %). This distribution suggests that people are either more aware of the costs of concessions than of their benefits, or that these costs affect their decision-making more than the benefits. *Consideration*, the only category that stated that the government needs to weigh the benefits and costs to decide on a case-by-case basis, was mentioned by 126 participants (42.9%). Even if we assumed that participants who made a statement from this category fully understood the consequences of making concessions, this was still only the minority of people.

We then recoded the data into three groups for quantitative analysis on a more abstract level: participants opposing concessions (i.e., participants who only made contra-concession statements, $n = 115$), participants supporting concessions (i.e., who only made pro-concession statements, $n = 24$), and participants with a balanced view (i.e., who made consideration statements or a mix of pro- and contra-concession statements, $n = 129$). We compared NCP support between these groups with a Kruskal-Wallis test, showing a significant main effect, $H(2) = 112.09$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.42$. Participants opposing concessions ($M = 6.12$, $SD = 0.95$) supported the NCP more than participants who supported concessions ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.83$), $z = 6.43$, $p < .001$, $r = .39$, and participants with a balanced view ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.42$), $z = 9.96$, $p < .001$, $r = .61$. NCP support did not differ

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between the latter two groups. This suggests that people's NCP support depends on what aspect of the dilemma they focus on.

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Table 3

Categories Derived From the Qualitative Analysis of Free-Text Answers

Category	Description	Exemplary Quote	Frequency
Deterrence	Statements saying that the government should not concede to terrorist demands because concessions could lead to more attacks or demands in the future.	"If the government concede to terrorist demands then this type of thing will occur again in near future."	94 (32 %)
Saving lives	Statements saying that the government should concede to terrorist demands to save the hostages.	"I believe if a person's life is on the line then the government should do what's best to save lives."	25 (8.5%)
Consideration	Statements saying that the government should decide on a case-by-case basis. These statements acknowledge the existence of positive and negative consequences of concessions and contain wording indicating that these consequences should be weighed against each other.	"I think it is probably good that governments intend not to concede to demands, as that will simply lead to more demands in future terrorist hostage takings. At the same time the government should do what it can to protect the lives of hostages and at times that means negotiation to a point where the government concedes [...]"	126 (42.9%)
Political appearance	Statements saying that the government should not concede because it would appear weak.	"Conceding to terrorist demands undermines our government and makes us appear weaker to enemies, terrorists and foreign countries alike."	13 (4.4%)
Distrust	Statements saying that the government should not concede because terrorists cannot be trusted.	"[...] in general, terrorists can't be trusted to keep their word, so meeting their demands serves little purpose."	8 (2.7%)
Orientation towards official policy	Statements saying that the person's opinion on the matter is based on the government's official policy.	"I guess I always have read in news reports that the government never negotiates with terrorists."	3 (1.0%)
Empathy	Statements saying that the person thought about the suffering of the hostages and their families. Also contains statements saying that the person considered what they would want the government to do if they or their family were taken hostage.	"I considered how the families of the victims must feel when the government doesn't concede and their loved one gets killed."	4 (1.4%)
Injustice	Statements saying that the government should not concede to terrorist demands because it would be unjust to reward terrorists for bad or morally reprehensible behavior.	"I do not want terrorists to think they can achieve their goals by hurting people. They should not be rewarded for their bad actions."	6 (2.0%)
Legitimacy	Statements saying that the government should not concede to terrorist demands because conceding would ascribe legitimacy to the terrorists, their cause, and their means.	"By conceding to terrorist demands they would be legitimating what they do [...]"	3 (1.0%)
Principle	Statements saying that the government should not concede to terrorist demands on principle. This category was only coded when no other explanation was provided.	"[...] it is a taboo for government to concede to the demands of terrorists."	12 (4.1%)

Note. Frequencies report how many participants made statements from the category in question. A total of 334 statements were made. 40 of

these statements were inapplicable because no useful category could be formed. Percentages were calculated based on the remaining 294 cases.

Study 2

Building on Study 1, in particular on the finding that different reasons were related to different degrees of NCP support, we conducted an experiment in which we varied the information that was available to our participants before they indicated their support. Specifically, we manipulated the availability of information on the benefits in the form of a hostage release (hereafter *benefits*) and costs in the form of more attacks in the future (hereafter *costs*).

Preregistered Hypotheses

We derived our hypotheses from the heuristic-systematic model of information processing (HSM; Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012; Chen & Chaiken, 1999). The HSM proposes that there are two stylized ways of processing information: *heuristically* and *systematically*. Heuristic processing focuses on salient cues and learned judgmental rules, while the more effortful systematic processing entails attempts to thoroughly understand and process available information. When people lack motivation or ability to systematically process information, then heuristic processing guides judgement. Given that most people consider terrorism a major threat (Poushter & Fagan, 2020), we assume that motivation to process information is high. However, when people receive no information about the potential consequences of concessions, ability should be low and judgement should be guided by heuristic information, such as stereotypes about terrorist behavior (e.g., Silke, 1998), values, norms, and consensus information (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001). As a result, NCP support should be high. Providing people with information should increase their knowledge and, thus, their ability, resulting in a higher likelihood of systematic processing. The systematic processing of information on the benefits should lead to more favorable views on concessions. The systematic processing of information on the costs, in turn, should lead to less favorable views. We hypothesized that people who are given only information on the

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benefits should support the NCP less than people who receive no information (H1). In contrast, people who are only given information on the costs should support the NCP more than people who receive no information (H2).

Method

Design

Our experiment used a 2 (benefits: information on benefits given vs. not given) \times 2 (costs: information on costs given vs. not given) between-subjects design. Thus, participants were randomly assigned to one of the following four conditions: no information, just benefits, just costs, and full information.

Sample

An a priori power analysis ($\alpha = .05$, $1-\beta = .80$, number of groups = 4, numerator $df = 1$) conducted with G*Power 3.1.9.4. (Faul et al., 2007) showed that detecting a small to medium-sized effect ($f = .15$) in an ANOVA requires a sample of $N = 351$. Our final sample consisted of $N = 417$ American Prolific users, who received \$1 as remuneration (45.56% female, 0.48% other; $M_{\text{age}} = 34.05$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.44$). None of them had previously participated in Study 1. Using the same question as in Study 1, a one sample t -test against the scale-midpoint showed that participants were rather liberal ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.65$), $t(416) = -10.38$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.51$, 95% CI $[-0.98; -0.70]$. Age, gender, and political orientation did not differ across conditions.

Procedure

After participants gave informed consent, they read a paragraph with general information. Depending on the experimental condition, participants received another paragraph containing additional information (Table 4). Participants then filled out a questionnaire (Table 1). Study completion took on average about five minutes.

Table 4*Manipulations Used in Study 2*

General paragraph		
In hostage-takings, terrorists abduct people and threaten to kill them unless the authorities concede to their demands. Many countries, including the United States of America, have a no-concessions policy. This means that they deny hostage-takers the benefits of ransom, prisoner releases, policy changes, or other acts of concession.		
Additional paragraph		
	Information on benefits not given	Information on benefits given
Information on costs not given	<i>no additional paragraph presented</i> (<i>n</i> = 112)	Recent studies have shown that conceding to the demands of terrorist hostage-takers increases the likelihood that the hostages are released safely. This means that concessions can reduce casualties in the hostage situation at hand. (<i>n</i> = 103)
Information on costs given	Recent studies have shown that conceding to the demands of terrorist hostage-takers creates an incentive for abductions. This means that concessions increase the likelihood of more hostage-takings in the future. (<i>n</i> = 101)	Recent studies showed that conceding to the demands of terrorist hostage-takers increases the likelihood that the hostages are released safely, but creates an incentive for abductions. This means that concessions can reduce casualties in the hostage situation at hand, but increase the likelihood of more hostage-takings in the future. (<i>n</i> = 101)

Results and Discussion

Table 5 shows descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for all variables assessed in this study. Overall NCP support was, again, high, $M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.70$.

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Table 5

Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations for All Variables in Study 2

			Intercorrelations									
Variable	<i>M (SD)</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1 NCP support	5.06 (1.70)	1										
2 Consideration of norm	4.39 (1.91)	.24***	1									
3 Consideration of benefits	4.64 (1.85)	-.03	.10*	1								
4 Consideration of costs	5.75 (1.40)	.49***	.18***	.08	1							
5 Perceived credibility	5.53 (1.23)	.20***	.11*	.11*	.18***	1						
6 Perceived likelihood of hostage release	3.55 (1.59)	-.32***	-.17***	.10*	-.20***	-.01	1					
7 Perceived likelihood of future attacks	5.84 (1.24)	.49***	.23***	-.04	.38***	.28***	-.31***	1				
8 Political orientation	3.16 (1.65)	.14**	.03	-.09	-.01	.08	-.10*	.10*	1			
9 Age	34.05 (11.44)	.12*	-.01	-.10*	-.03	.12*	.01	.09	.18***	1		
10 Information on benefits given		-.25***	-.04	.02	-.07	-.17***	.26***	-.15**	.01	-.10	1	
11 Information on costs given		.04	-.01	.08	.07	.08	-.03	.01	.00	-.05	.02	1

Note. $N = 417$, *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Confirmatory Analyses

To test H1, we ran a bootstrapped independent samples *t*-test comparing NCP support between participants who received information on the benefits ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 1.92$) and participants who received no information ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.47$), $t(190.787) = 4.45$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.61$, 95% CI [0.52; 1.56].¹ The results support H1.

To test H2, we compared NCP support between participants who received information on the costs ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 1.47$) and participants who received no information ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.47$) with a bootstrapped independent samples *t*-test. NCP support did not differ between these conditions, $t(211) = -0.22$, $p = .826$, $d = -0.03$, 95% CI [-0.43; 0.33].² H2 was not supported.

In concert, these results suggest that people generally have negative preconceptions about terrorist behavior that lead them to oppose concessions. Information on the benefits of concessions seem to conflict with these preconceptions of terrorist behavior (resulting in changes in NCP support), while information on the costs do not.

Exploratory Analyses

A robust trimmed-means ANOVA (Mair & Wilcox, 2020) with NCP support as the criterion and information on benefits and costs as the predictors revealed a main effect of information on benefits, $F(1, 413) = 24.24$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.06$. Participants who received information on benefits ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 1.81$) supported the NCP less than participants who did not receive information on benefits ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 1.47$), providing further support for the previous findings.

Finally, an exploratory parallel mediation analysis revealed that a pattern that is consistent with a dual mediation: the negative effect of information on benefits on NCP

¹ A sensitivity power ($\alpha = .05$, $1 - \beta = 0.80$, two-tailed) analysis in G*Power 3.1.9.4. (Faul et al., 2007) showed that the minimum effect size for this analysis was $d = 0.38$.

² The minimum effect size for this analysis was $d = 0.39$.

support could be due to changes in the perceived likelihoods of a hostage release and future attacks (Figure A, online supplement).

Study 3

In Study 2, we investigated people's responses to terrorist hostage-takings as a moral dilemma while varying the availability of information on potential costs and benefits of concessions. In Study 3, we were interested in people's responses to this dilemma under complete information as it would be presented in traditional moral dilemma research. In the classic Trolley problem, the decision to take action—and thus killing one instead of five people—has been interpreted as *utilitarian* (i.e., maximizing overall wellbeing), while the decision to not take action has been interpreted as *deontological* (i.e., adhering to moral norms). Gawronski et al. (2017) criticized this interpretation of choices in moral dilemmas for two reasons: First, the consequences and norms (i.e., the core aspects of the utilitarian and deontological principals) are rarely subject to experimental manipulation. Second, interpreting moral decisions as either utilitarian or deontological disregards the possibility that a moral decision might be driven by a general preference for action or inaction, irrespective of the consequences and norms. To address these limitations in our investigation of terrorist hostage-taking policies, in Study 3 we independently manipulated the consequences, salient norm, and whether supporting concessions was the action or inaction default. We also included further criterion variables beyond NCP support that are often employed in moral dilemma research: the perceived appropriateness of taking action and participants' behavioral intention to take action.

Preregistered Hypotheses and Research Questions

Making concessions will likely result in hostage release (Mertes et al., 2020, 2021) and more attacks in the future (Brandt et al., 2016). Even if these future attacks endanger “only” the same number as people as the hostage-taking at hand (i.e., if the gains and losses

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are equivalent), losses are assumed to loom larger than corresponding gains (e.g., Tversky & Kahneman, 1991). When concessions to terrorist hostage-takers lead to attacks involving more people (i.e., the benefits are lower than the costs), people should be particularly *loss-averse* (Tversky & Kahneman, 1991) and thus less inclined to support concessions. When concessions do not lead to more attacks (i.e., the benefits are greater than the costs), people should be more inclined to support concessions. Thus, we hypothesized that when the benefits of concessions are greater (vs. lower) than the costs, people should express more intent to support concessions (H1a), perceive concessions as more appropriate (H1b), and express less NCP support (H1c).

In uncertain situations, people often turn to salient norms in order to inform their decision-making (e.g., Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). As mentioned earlier, terrorist hostage-takings entail uncertainty even when the dilemma is laid out in detail. When a norm prescribing concessions is made salient (e.g., “human life in danger should be saved”), then people should be more inclined to support concessions than when a norm prohibiting concessions is made salient (e.g., “terrorist demands should never be granted”). We thus expected that when a prescriptive norm prescribes concessions (vs. when a proscriptive norm prohibits them), people should express more intent to support concessions (H2a), perceive concessions as more appropriate (H2b), and express less NCP support (H2c).

People experience stronger regret for negative outcomes when these outcomes result from actions rather than inactions (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982; Gilovich & Medvec, 1995). Thus, they should be hesitant to support concessions because they want to avoid the regret of a potential negative outcome. However, this so-called *action effect* is reversed when prior negative outcomes suggest taking action (*inaction effect*, Zeelenberg et al., 2002), for example, when denying concessions has led to hostage executions in the past. Although most people are not directly involved with hostage-takings, they acquire knowledge about past

hostage situations through media coverage, which is likely to include examples in which denying concessions has led to negative outcomes (e.g., Callimachi, 2014b). In sum, both the action effect (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982) and the inaction effect (Zeelenberg et al., 2002) might apply. Therefore, we pose the following research question: Is there higher support for concessions to terrorist hostage-takers when supporting concessions is the action default or the inaction default (RQ1)?

Method

Design

We implemented a 2 (consequences: benefits of concessions greater vs. lower than costs) \times 2 (norm: prescriptive norm prescribes concessions vs. proscriptive norm prohibits concessions) \times 2 (action/inaction: supporting concessions is the action default vs. the inaction default) between-subjects design. We assigned participants randomly to the resulting eight conditions.

Sample

An a priori power analysis ($\alpha = .05$, $1-\beta = .80$, number of groups = 8, numerator $df = 1$) in G*Power 3.1.9.4 (Faul et al., 2007) showed that detecting a small-sized effect ($f = .10$) in an ANOVA requires a total sample size of $N = 787$. As preregistered, we excluded all participants who failed one or more attention checks³. Recruiting 1080 participants left us with a final sample of $N = 829$ American Prolific users who had answered all attention checks correctly and had not participated in the previous studies (50.54% female, 2.53% other; $M_{\text{age}} = 35.01$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.33$). Participants received \$0.60 as remuneration. Again, participants were rather liberal ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.64$), $t(828) = -16.06$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.56$, 95% CI [-1.03; -0.81]. Age, gender, and political orientation did not differ across conditions.

³ $n = 112$ answered the consequences attention check item incorrectly. $n = 123$ answered the norms attention check item incorrectly. $n = 89$ answered the action/inaction attention check item incorrectly.

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Procedure

After participants gave informed consent, they were presented with a scenario. We asked them to read it carefully and informed them that they would be asked questions to check for attentive reading. The scenario and the manipulations are described in Table 6. We then asked participants to complete a questionnaire (Table 1). Completing the study took on average five minutes.

Table 6

Scenario and Manipulations Used in Study 3

Factor	Text	
	“You read a newspaper article about an ongoing terrorist hostage-taking. A terrorist organization has abducted a journalist from your country and threatens to kill him if the government does not pay a ransom of one million dollars. A rescue mission is not an option because the terrorists' current location is unknown. The terrorists have a reputation for adhering to agreements with the authorities and acting on deadlines. If ransom is paid, they will release the hostage safely. If ransom is denied, they will execute the hostage. In this particular case, the authorities state that they have no reason to believe otherwise.”	
Consequences	Benefits of concessions greater than costs “Based on information on their past activities, it is highly likely that the terrorists would use the ransom money to support their communities. Thus, it is rather unlikely that more people would come to harm.” (<i>n</i> = 406)	Benefits of concessions lower than costs “Based on information on their past activities, it is highly likely that the terrorists would use the ransom money to execute more attacks in the future. Thus, it is rather likely that more people would come to harm.” (<i>n</i> = 423)
Norm	Prescriptive norm prescribes concessions “The article reports results of a recent poll, which showed that the absolute majority of people in your country believe that human life in danger should be saved whenever possible.” (<i>n</i> = 421)	Proscriptive norm prohibits concessions “The article reports results of a recent poll, which showed that the absolute majority of people in your country believe that terrorist demands should not be granted.” (<i>n</i> = 408)
Action/Inaction	Supporting concessions is the action default “The article tells about a petition urging the government not to pay the ransom.” (<i>n</i> = 423) “You do not know who initiated the petition. The petition is less than 24 hours old, so there is no information on how many people already signed it. The platform hosting the petition is considered trustworthy. Signing the petition would not require you to create an account or to give any sensitive information about yourself.”	Supporting concessions is the inaction default “The article tells about a petition urging the government to pay the ransom.” (<i>n</i> = 406)

Note. The consequences and norm manipulations were adapted from Gawronski et al. (2017).

Results and Discussion

Table 7 shows descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for all variables assessed in this study. In this study, overall NCP support was lower than in the previous studies ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.68$).

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Table 7

Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations for All Variables in Study 3

			Intercorrelations																
			<i>M (SD)</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1	Consequences	0.49 (0.50)	1																
2	Norms	0.51 (0.50)	-.02	1															
3	Action/inaction	0.49 (0.50)	.03	-.02	1														
4	Support behavior	0.65 (0.48)	.17***	.08*	.30***	1													
5	NCP support	4.06 (1.68)	-.16***	-.06	.02	-.51***	1												
6	Appropriateness	4.56 (1.81)	.20***	.13***	.03	.57***	-.70***	1											
7	Consideration of norms	2.73 (1.75)	.00	.07	-.06	.01	.04	.04	1										
8	Consideration of hostage release	5.24 (1.79)	.17***	.04	.03	.50***	-.54***	.64***	-.02	1									
9	Consideration of future consequences	5.24 (1.71)	-.10**	-.05	-.09*	-.35***	.44***	-.42***	.05	-.30***	1								
10	Perceived likelihood of hostage release	5.10 (1.59)	.09**	.00	-.03	.33***	-.43***	.48***	-.03	.54***	-.24***	1							
11	Perceived likelihood of future attacks	5.07 (1.86)	-.49***	-.05	-.06	-.37***	.40***	-.39***	.05	-.33***	.30***	-.30***	1						
12	Scenario plausibility	5.46 (1.39)	-.13***	-.01	.04	-.00	.03	.00	.05	.05	.05	.09**	.15***	1					
13	Scenario plausibility (no alternatives)	3.85 (1.70)	.07	.06	.01	.17***	-.19***	.20***	.10**	.19***	-.09*	.17***	-.10**	.28***	1				
14	Perceived credibility	5.16 (1.31)	-.15***	.00	.02	-.00	.03	.00	.08*	.06	.01	.13***	.13***	.64***	.32***	1			
15	Political orientation	3.09 (1.64)	-.03	.01	.02	-.12***	.20***	-.21***	.09**	-.17***	.11**	-.19***	.11**	.00	-.03	-.00	1		
16	Age	35.01 (12.33)	.01	.01	.09**	-.04	.15***	-.20***	-.12***	-.15***	.05	-.09*	.07*	.04	.05	.09*	.17***	1	

Note. $N = 829$, *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Confirmatory Analyses

Answers from the support behavior intention item (see Table 1) were recoded so that answers supporting concessions were coded as 1 and answers opposing concessions were coded as 0. Table 8 shows the results of logistic regression analysis with support behavior intention as the criterion variable and consequences, norms, and action/inaction as the predictors. As hypothesized (H1a, H2a), people were more likely to express intent to support concessions when the benefits were greater than the costs and when a prescriptive norm prescribed concessions. Further, they were more likely to express intent to support concessions when support was the inaction default (RQ 1), which provides evidence for the action effect⁴.

Table 8

Logistic Regression of Support Behavior on Consequences, Norms, and Action/Inaction

	<i>B</i>	SE	Wald- $\chi^2(1)$	<i>p</i>	OR	95% CI OR
Consequences	0.76	0.16	23.47	< .001	2.15	[1.58; 2.93]
Norms	0.43	0.16	7.51	.006	1.54	[1.13; 2.09]
Action/Inaction	1.38	0.16	73.65	< .001	3.99	[2.11; 5.47]
Constant	-0.55	0.15	13.47	< .001	0.58	

Note. $\chi^2(3) = 109.49, p < .001$. Cox & Snell $R^2 = .12$. Nagelkerke's $R^2 = .17$.

A robust trimmed-means ANOVA with appropriateness of concessions as the criterion variable and consequences, norms, and action/inaction as predictors found main effects of consequences, $F(1, 825) = 29.92, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .04, f = 0.20$, and norms,

⁴ A sensitivity power analysis ($\alpha = .05$, $1 - \beta = .80$, two-tailed, $p_2 \geq p_1$, $\Pr(Y=1|X=1) H_0 = 0.57$, total $N = 829$, R^2 other $X = 0$, X distribution = binomial, X parameter $\pi = .49$) in G*Power 3.1.9.7 (Faul et al., 2007) revealed that the minimum odds ratio for this analysis was OR = 1.50.

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$F(1, 825) = 15.67, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .02, f = 0.14^5$. Concessions were considered more appropriate when the benefits outweighed the costs ($M = 4.92, SD = 1.69$) than when the costs outweighed the benefits ($M = 4.22, SD = 1.86$). Concessions were seen as more appropriate when a prescriptive norm prescribed concessions ($M = 4.79, SD = 1.81$) than when a proscriptive norm prohibited them ($M = 4.33, SD = 1.78$). These findings support H1b and H2b.

An ANOVA with NCP support as the criterion variable and consequences, norms, and action/inaction as predictors showed a main effect of consequences, $F(1, 825) = 21.95, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .03, f = 0.18^6$. NCP support was higher when the benefits of concessions outweighed the costs ($M = 3.79, SD = 1.65$) than when the costs outweighed the benefits ($M = 4.32, SD = 1.66$). Thus, H1c was supported, but H2c, for a lack of a main effect of norms, was not. In sum, confirmatory analyses revealed that consequences and—to a lesser extent—norms were important influences, indicating that participants' decisions were guided by both utilitarian and deontological considerations.

Exploratory Analyses

Again, an exploratory parallel mediation analyses indicated that the effects of consequences on NCP support could be due to changes in the perceived likelihoods of a hostage release and future attacks (Figure B, online supplement), which is consistent with Study 2.

General Discussion

In terrorist hostage-takings, the people's lives depend on their government's willingness to concede to the terrorists' demands. Governments often contravene their official

⁵ A sensitivity power analysis ($\alpha = .05, 1 - \beta = .80$, total $N = 829$, numerator $df = 1$, number of groups = 8) in G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) showed that the minimum effect size for these analyses was $f = 0.10$.

⁶ Again, the minimum effect size was $f = .10$.

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NCPs (e.g., Callimachi, 2014a). Given that public policy support can affect government adherence to standing policies, we investigated what actually shapes people's NCP support in three studies with a mixed-methods approach.

We found converging evidence that people's NCP support differs depending on the reasons they consider (see Study 1), on which information they have, and what their resulting understanding of the hostage dilemma is. If they are not given extra information, people apparently resort to heuristic processing of stereotypes about terrorist behavior (e.g., Silke, 1998), values, norms, and consensus information spread in political rhetoric and media coverage (e.g., "Bush's Statement on the Middle East", 2002; Borger et al., 2014). These heuristics strongly oppose the idea that making concessions can be advisable. Consequently, people tend to support the NCP despite their imperfect knowledge that it is, in fact, the standing policy.

In line with our hypotheses derived from the HSM (Chen & Chaiken, 1999), simply giving people a one-sided statement about the scientifically proven benefits of concessions to terrorist hostage-takers (Mertes et al., 2020, 2021) reduced NCP support. Providing a one-sided statement on the costs had no effect. It is possible that these findings occurred because people process information on the benefits and costs differently. The HSM proposes that people balance their aspiration to be confident in their decision with their preference to conserve cognitive resources (Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012). The difference between a person's confidence in their decision and the degree of confidence they desire is called the *confidence gap*. Closing bigger confidence gaps requires more effortful processing. Information on the costs are congruent with people's easily accessible heuristics, so the confidence gap should be small. Information on the benefits, however, widen the confidence gap by challenging these heuristics, resulting in more systematic processing. These findings

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underscore the applicability of the HSM in investigations of popular support for the NCP and political decision-making in general (cf. Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012).

We further investigated how people decide in how far they support the NCP when the moral dilemma is outlined in detail. Following recent moral dilemma research, we disentangled a common confound by manipulating the consequences of making concessions, the salient moral norm, and whether supporting concessions was the action or inaction default (e.g., Gawronski et al., 2017). The detailed presentation of the moral dilemma increased people's ability to systematically process the information (Chen & Chaiken, 1999), which led to overall lower support for the NCP than under conditions with no or incomplete information. NCP support was mainly driven by utilitarian considerations, but the perceived appropriateness of concessions and people's intention to support concessions were also driven by deontological considerations. Traditionally, these moral principles were considered opposites, but do both alter support for concessions when manipulated independently in our studies (cf. Gawronski et al., 2017).

Our findings have important practical implications for policymakers. First, it appears that there are hostage situations in which people would be more approving of concessions than they would be in others. We found that people approve concessions more when the benefits of conceding outweigh the costs. When this is the case, conceding might be advisable (Mertes et al., 2020) and would likely find more support among voters. Second, our findings underline the importance of tailoring political communication (McNair, 2017). Communication acknowledging the government's responsibility to save the hostages' lives and evidence that making concessions will likely result in a safe hostage release (Mertes et al., 2020, 2021) may increase public support for conceding to terrorists in order to save the hostages. Also, providing sufficient information on the hostage situation in political communication could increase support for concessions by increasing people's ability to

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systematically process the information that is available in a specific hostage-taking situation rather than resort to heuristics.

Our work may be limited by our exclusively American samples. As we noted above, Americans might be more ardent in their support of government anti-terror policies than citizens from other countries. Yet, we were able to show that even Americans' support for the NCP differs depending on the available information. Nevertheless, future research should investigate whether these findings generalize to nations with a more lenient stance on concessions to terrorist hostage-takers.

Conclusion

The current research advances our knowledge of public support for government policy in terrorist hostage-takings. Peoples' perceptions of these policies depend on the information that people have available to make their decision. More detailed communication with a focus on the benefits may increase public support for concessions.

Open Science Practices Statement

We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures (Simmons et al., 2012). Data collection for each individual study did not continue after data analysis. The sample sizes, exclusion criteria, hypotheses, and analyses for Studies 2 (https://osf.io/ubqvz/?view_only=ca8829c698fb449c8c4cda37a321501b) and 3 (https://osf.io/nszve/?view_only=68b18d4270ee416880f2a6a5e629ca95) were publicly preregistered. Deviations from the preregistrations are fully disclosed. Raw and processed data is available at https://osf.io/y9s4x/?view_only=0bea30e47dfb47e5a26ea7de0b221c33.

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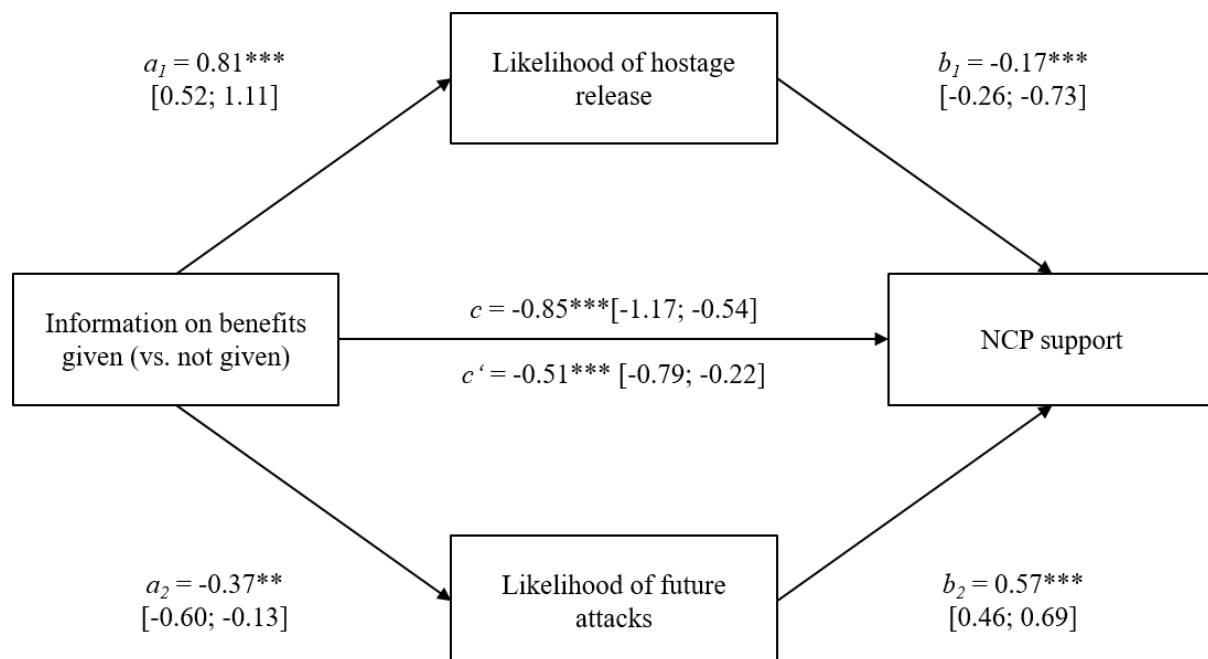
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<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.82.3.314>

Online Supplement

Exploratory Analyses Study 2

Perceived Credibility

A bootstrapped *t*-test revealed that participants who received information on benefits ($M = 5.31, SD = 1.26$) found the information provided in the study to be less credible than participants who received no information on benefits ($M = 5.74, SD = 1.16$), $t(415) = -3.60$, $p = .002$, $d = -0.35$, 95% CI [0.19; 0.69]. Information on the costs did not affect perceived credibility. Thus, people doubt that terrorists will release the hostages after the government conceded to their demands, but not that terrorists will use the resources gained from concessions to execute further attacks.

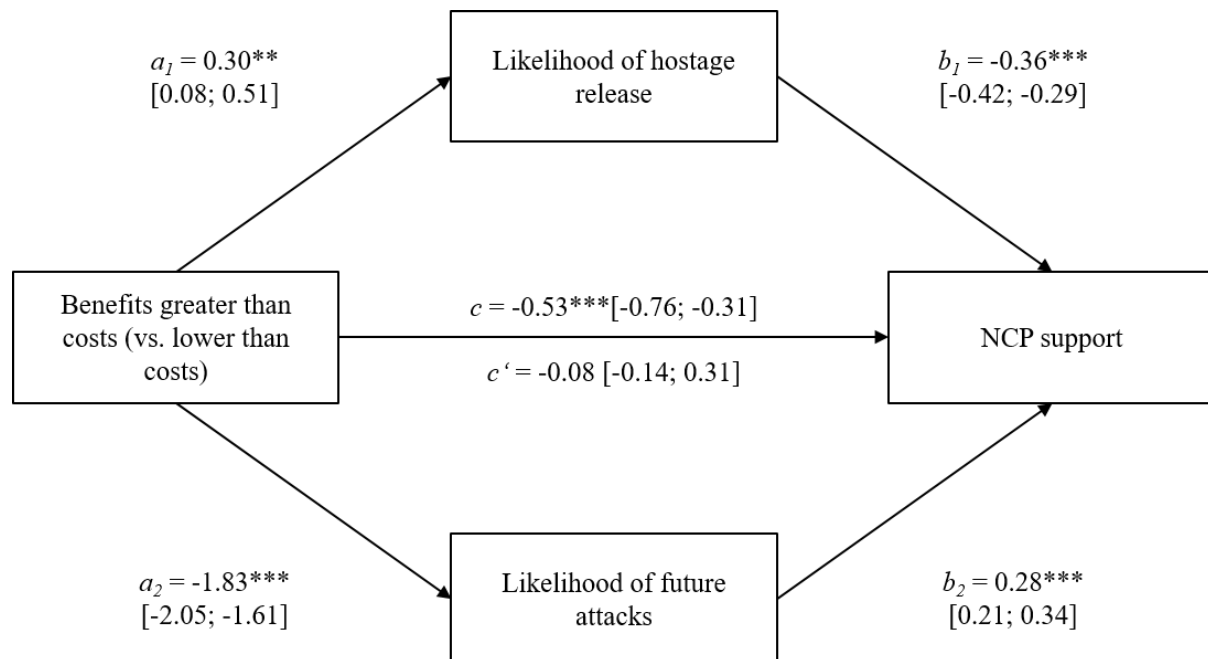
Figure A*Exploratory Mediation Analysis from Study 2*

Note. Mediation analyses conducted using model 4 of the PROCESS v3.5 macro (Hayes, 2018). Unstandardized path-coefficients reported with 95% confidence intervals in brackets. Confidence intervals based on 10000 bootstrap samples. $** p < .01$, $*** p < .001$. $a_1 \times b_1 = -0.13$ [-0.24; -0.05], $a_2 \times b_2 = -0.21$ [-0.36; -0.07], total indirect effect = -0.35 [-0.53; -0.17].

Exploratory Analyses Study 3

Perceived Credibility

A bootstrapped t -test revealed that participants found the information in the scenario less credible when the benefits of concessions were greater than the costs ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.38$) than when the benefits were lower than the costs ($M = 5.35$, $SD = 1.22$), $t(827) = 4.37$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.30$, 95% CI [0.21; 0.57]. People apparently struggle to believe that concessions to terrorist hostage-takers might not result in future attacks, which is consistent with Study 2.

Figure B*Exploratory Mediation Analysis from Study 3*

Note. Mediation analyses conducted using model 4 of the PROCESS v3.5 macro (Hayes, 2018). Unstandardized path-coefficients reported with 95% confidence intervals in brackets. Confidence intervals based on 10000 bootstrap samples. $** p < .01$, $*** p < .001$. $a_1 \times b_1 = -0.11$ [-0.19; -0.03], $a_2 \times b_2 = -0.51$ [-0.68; -0.36], total indirect effect = -0.61 [-0.80; -0.44].